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ABSTRACT

This document lists critical factors that would assist in assuring quality in nontraditional programs in higher education. These factors include: (1) a statement of program purposes that has the commitment of the major factors in implementing the program; (2) given purposes specified at the university as well as program level, the institution should have a strategy of instruction viewed as likely to produce the desired outcomes with relative efficiency for the students involved; (3) The institution should be able to state the criteria upon which satisfactory performance would be judged and to state the level of proficiency or achievement expected as minimum on these criteria; and (4) The institution should have a strategy for monitoring its performance and for follow-up in acting upon the findings and recommendations emerging from the monitoring activity. Steps that will best provide improved quality assurance in nontraditional programs are listed for nontraditional institutions of higher education; federal and state regulatory agencies; accrediting agencies; investigative journalists, educational researchers, and publishers of information on nontraditional programs; counseling and advocacy-oriented third parties; prospective students; consortia of institutions of higher education; and the courts. Providing prospective users adequate information and improving quality control in nontraditional programs are discussed. (MJM)

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Remarks to the Conference on Quality Control in Nontraditional Higher Education -- An Approach to a Theory of Quality Assurance

by Morris Keeton

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One promising approach to the improvement of efforts to assure quality in nontraditional programs in higher education is to design these efforts in accordance with a well-thought out theory of the major factors that make for the desired quality.

Such a list of critical factors (variables) might include the following:

1) A statement of program purposes which has the commitment of the major actors in implementing the program:

   a) Quality is a function of purpose. Lacking an agreement on purpose, there cannot be clear criteria as to whether the outcomes of the program are good in the ways intended. Given an agreement on purpose, there may still be disagreement as to the best ways to pursue it; but at least the merits of these methods can be argued in the light of the objectives that are supposed to be served.

   b) Purposes need to be specified at at least two levels:

      i) Overall institutional purpose of the college or university should be recognized and stated.

      ii) Purpose or objectives of the specific degree program or certificate program should be specified if the institution has more than one program for furthering its overall purposes. Antioch, for example, favors the provision of differently defined bachelor's degree programs for different clienteles (groups or individuals) with diverse needs, background, and objectives. For each such bachelor's degree program, then, there should be a statement of rationale appropriate to those students and to the institution's purpose in choosing to serve them.

2) Given purposes specified at the two levels just indicated, the institution should have a strategy of instruction (and of its management) viewed as likely to produce the desired outcomes with relative efficiency for the students involved. Such a strategy would involve the following elements:

   a) A theory as to the inputs appropriate to these students and this program's purpose and circumstances;

   b) A theory as to the processes of learning and teaching likely to be both feasible and workable for these students and these purposes;

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c) A strong likelihood of being able to fulfill the input and process requirements indicated in 2a and 2b.

3) For purposes of quality assurance, the institution should be able, with respect to intended outcomes of a nontraditional program, to state the criteria upon which satisfactory performance (or good or exceptional performance) would be judged and to state the level of proficiency or achievement expected as minimum (or for higher ratings) on these criteria; alternatively, the institution should be able to say how such criteria and standards for credit or degree or certificate would be developed in a timely way (in other words, if the program is highly individualized, there might have to be procedural standards to develop the substantive standards for each student or group of students).

4) For purposes of both quality assurance and program improvement, the institution should have a strategy for monitoring its performance with respect to Conditions 1, 2, and 3 above and for follow up in acting upon the findings and recommendations emerging from the monitoring activity; and the means for implementing this monitoring-and-follow-up strategy should be in hand.

All of what is said above applies also, of course, to traditional institutions of higher education and to traditional programs. It is also the case that few have developed quality assurance systems which would gladden our hearts as fulfillment of this theory. This fact raises the question as to the height of expectation that we ought to hold out — or the level of demand we should insist upon — for existing or proposed nontraditional programs to meet.

Given the imperfect state of the art of quality assurance in this field, what are the steps offering the best hope for improvement in the immediate future? It is to this question -- applied to clarifying minimum standards and performance, disclosure, and quality control systems -- that I hope this Conference will speak most pointedly.

To pursue that question -- what steps are best for improving quality assurance in nontraditional programs? -- we list here some of the proposals that have come to our attention with respect to the three main concerns of the Conference:

Main Concern #1. Assuring That Minimum Standards are Met and Communicated

1. Steps by the Nontraditional Institutions of Higher Education:

a. Better (clearer) definition of minimum standards;
b. More reliable enforcement of minimum standards; and
c. Clearer and more understandable communication of minimum standards to students, accreditors, and other outsiders.
d. Introduction, where appropriate, of specifications of competences (and levels of proficiency in them required as minimum) to be achieved as requirements for credit or degrees (a specific way of implementation of a).
e. Use of standards files and improved degree contracts as a way of implementing Steps 1a, b, and c.

Steps 1 a-e focus upon outcomes--their definition and enforcement of their achievement--as the key to definition, enforcement, and disclosure of minimum standards.

Main Concern #1. Minimum Standards (continued)

f. Clarification of alternative standards as to the inputs and processes appropriate to adequate educational service in nontraditional programs, accompanied by enforcement and communication as to the minima suited to these criteria.

2. Steps by federal and state regulatory agencies:

a. Better definition of minimum standards, or delegation of this function to other people or organizations who can more appropriately perform it (see Granat critique of model law proposed by Education Commission of the States);

b. More uniform and equitable enforcement of minimum standards reliance in respect to educational standards upon more appropriate bodies for such judgements and/or their enforcement).

Steps 2a and 2b are stated so that the choice is left open as to whether the standards that are practical can best be output, input, or process standards or some combination of them.

Until competent and appropriate parties articulate better standards appropriate to the purposes of the programs in question, none of the other efforts toward assurance of good minimum standards can be effective. Student efforts, journalistic work, court action, market competion, and advisory or advocacy services all must rely upon there being somewhere an understanding of what is good! I assume that "what is good" in a democratic society of pluralistic make-up must be a matter of collective subjective judgment of some mix of people representing different elements of the public interest. But whoever they are, in whatever mix, the technical work of clarification of alternative standards and of their relevance to alternative purposes is a prerequisite to genuine improvement. If there is any argument on this point, we ought to bring it out!

c. Better enforcement of laws and governmental regulations with respect to misrepresentation, fraud, and abuses calling for governmental action to protect consumers (see ECS draft law and Granat comments; also see Orlans and Arnstein publications bearing upon this matter).

d. Development of appropriate constraints upon state and federal action and policies which prevent or hamper to the public detriment the competition among institutions of higher education to render an appropriate array of alternative programs and to deliver them in an appropriate diversity of ways.

3. Steps by accrediting agencies:

a. Initiatives toward better definition of output, input, and process standards suited to the purposes and clienteles and public needs for nontraditional programs, possibly in lieu of such activity by state and federal regulatory bodies with respect to educational aspects of minimum standards (see current FRACHE and regional

Main Concern #1. Minimum Standards (continued)

association guidelines (notably Southern Association's) as to present state of the art).

b. Formation of a voluntary association of nontraditional institutions of higher education to assume the normal functions of such voluntary bodies with respect to this particular category of institutions (I do not advocate this step; but it is being advocated seriously by some people; a preferable alternative is indicated below, in my estimate, as a task for certain kinds of consortia).

4. Steps by investigative journalists, educational researchers, and publishers of information on nontraditional programs:

a. More, more diverse, and better "profiles", rating reports, and publications of comparative data on nontraditional programs, including 8mm film or videotape vignettes, all done by disinterested third parties, preferably more than one party with more than one ideological or stylistic orientation concerning each program (See Yale, Barron's, and other examples presented in background materials).

b. Exposes by journalists.

c. In-depth reports and studies on the range and variety of options available in nontraditional studies, their uses and abuses, and the state of the art, which counsel as to how to obtain and use the needed information.

5. Steps by counseling and advocacy-oriented third parties:

a. Improved advisory or counseling services to prospective students and parents or friends, both nonpartisan (e.g., at secondary schools) and partisan (e.g., advocacy service with a particular axe or axes to grind), using the better information being generated in the other ways indicated here.

b. Legal services or ombudsman services helping consumers to obtain their rights or to gain better services from the nontraditional programs.

6. Steps by prospective students:

a. Greater use of site visits prior to application and selection of programs; greater use of training and counseling as to how best to use site visits for program choice.

b. More insightful use by prospective students of the disclosures of and about the nontraditional programs; greater use of counseling to become able to make this more insightful use of data.

7. Steps by consortia of institutions of higher education:

a. Joint efforts to educate the users of academic credentials to limit the use of the credentials to appropriate functions and to "read"

Main Concern #1. Minimum Standards (continued)

or understand those credentials more accurately.

b. Formation of one or more consortia of nontraditional institutions to facilitate collaborative development of minimum standards, whether common or diverse, which they recognize as good ones for their respective purposes, and to communicate how these standards and the programs to which they apply can best be used (this help might then be fed into the existing accrediting bodies and regulatory bodies for their uses).

c. Joint efforts to create a climate (an ethic) within higher education that is hospitable to constructive competition among institutions of higher education and inhospitable to activity which has the effect of conspiracy in restraint of competition for better service to the public needs in higher education.

8. Steps taken by or through the courts:

a. Rulings which restrict the use of degrees and other credentials to uses in employment and promotion and rewards which uses have a demonstrable relationship to the requirements of the employment in question;

b. Rulings which support constructive competion in the provision of higher education services;

c. Rulings in support of accountability of nontraditional programs and their representatives with respect to the claims made to prospective students or other users of their services or credentials.

Main Concern #2. Providing Prospective Users Adequate Information

Rather than repeat here the list of parties which might help with this concern, I will list types of aid which one or more of them might provide. Which of them should do what may be debatable.

1. Prospectuses, both comprehensive and special purpose. Key issues about prospectuses are questions as to what they should disclose, how to get candor in disclosure, how to enable the user to make insightful use of the disclosures, and how to reflect the varieties of data needed for different kinds of evaluation (e.g., people with different religious or ideological persuasions, different vocational needs, etc.).

2. Certified Public Educational Audits. Here is an idea for a new function for accrediting bodies or for a new kind of private enterprise, which would take the institution's prospectus and audit to determine whether it can be certified by a disinterested third party to be an accurate representation. Such auditors, like financial auditors, might also have the function of providing letters of counsel to the management about the improvement of its educational programs.

Main Concern #2. Information for Prospective Users (continued)

3. Transfer Equivalency Services. One of the needs of many students is to be able to transfer their credits, without loss, to other institutions than those where they were earned. Since institutions' degrees are differently defined and since institutional standards vary significantly, a "translation" service that could both figure out authoritatively the transfer value of credits and advise students accordingly might be a useful service.

4. Guidance Services. See Item 5 under Main Concern #1.

5. Research and Journalistic Reports. See Item 4 under Main Concern #1.

6. Books or a Reference Library of Profiles or Comparative Analysis and Description of Nontraditional Programs.

Main Concern #3. Improving Quality Control in Nontraditional Programs

The suggestions listed here are all intended for implementation by the institutions themselves which are offering nontraditional programs. This concern is not addressed to the regulatory or accrediting bodies.

1. Clarification of Degree Objectives and Standards.

2. Study by Faculty, Students, and Administrators of Theories of Learning and of Instruction; Adoption of One or More Policies Involving Commitment to Theories Most Appropriate to the Programs Undertaken (see Coleman and Keeton papers).

3. Clarification and Adoption of Internal Standards for Cost/Effective Input Characteristics and Process Characteristics for Nontraditional Programs.

4. Disclosure of Output Study Results.

5. Academic Audits and Academic Review Committees and Processes.

6. Development of "Alternative Futures" as an Aid to Quality Control.

7. Studying Student Evaluations of Program and Market Responses as an Aid to Quality Assurance Objectives.

8. Making an Appropriate Division of Responsibilities in Quality Control Among Central Administration, Program Administrators, Faculty and Other Parties.

As the Conference November 10-12 gets under way, we will attempt with the help of participants to select foci for our discussions that will enable us to make as good progress as possible with our primary agenda question: How can we best improve the efforts to assure quality in nontraditional programs?